
Foreign Communications and Articulating the Essence of PSYOP

by

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Editor's Note: In this article Major Mushtare discusses the difficulty surrounding the perception of the meaning and use of the title psychological operations and how it is often difficult to articulate the actual meaning of the title to lessor informed audiences and stakeholders. His solution to the problem warrants thoughtful consideration.

The time is past due for the U.S. Army Psychological Operations (PSYOP) community to institute a viable alternative to it's frequently, but understandably, misconstrued name. As virtually all practitioners within the current PSYOP community will likely acknowledge, we continue to suffer from the common misperceptions that the term "PSYOP" often engenders within those individuals unfamiliar with its core missions that we perform. Consequently, this has, on occasion, led to difficulties in performance of our missions, over-scrutiny of our soldiers, negative preconceived notions by interagency or host nation partners, and from time to time, poor publicity within the U.S. media. Given our obvious understanding of the magnitude of the written and spoken word, we should be cognizant of the importance of rectifying

this current disconnect in a timely manner; and no, I am not advocating "MindWar"¹ as a worthy substitute.

In light of the evident baggage that our profession's name carries, it was disconcerting that we still did not have consensus for an actionable alternative at the time that PSYOP was formally instituted as one of the newest branches in the Army during the fall of 2006. Some individuals have advocated the formation of an "Information Warfare Branch"² and others have declared the need for a merger of PSYOP and Information Operations into one Information Operations Branch³; this turf war has been going on for far too long without coherent resolution. The PSYOP mission where the need for resolution may be the most apparent, however, is most likely within the Military Information Support Teams (MISTs). It is currently, and should rightfully continue to be, the role of PSYOP; to institute and maintain MISTs at various embassies around the world. When given the highly politicized nature of introducing DOD forces into many of these interagency environments and compounded by the demands of mission execution in a wide variety of decentralized locations with minimal personnel, the importance of resolving this issue swiftly is obvious and



Tactical PSYOP Soldier Speaks with Iraqi Family

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clear. Even to this day, in some U.S. Embassies around the world, both the terms “PSYOP” and “MIST” are viewed as both derogatory in nature and ultimately offer potential blowback against U.S. Country Teams. Interagency credibility is hard enough to build and maintain without entering into the situation with one hand tied behind your back due to the possible stigmas that these terms often carry. Furthermore, the PSYOP community failing to surmount such an easy obstacle as a name change should not hamper forward progress and potentially advantageous mutually supportive regional effects.

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Brian Rohm recently asserted in an article that, “Some argue that we need to change PSYOP’s name because it is associated with propaganda, lying, and misinformation, but those critics are missing the larger issue: what we actually need is a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize information operations.”⁴ This, however, is actually far from the current reality, which is in fact, that PSYOP must change its name for the sake of its Soldiers’ effectiveness and credibility because successes in the current Global War on Terror require their expertise and capabilities. This is even truer given the ever-expanding demand for PSYOP forces, which presently seems very different from their “losing relevance” as has been recently claimed.⁵ Notwithstanding the current increasing scramble for the Information Operations Functional Area to seek to define itself and its role in the Army, the PSYOP community, as the force with both the bulk of the “IO” doers and mission requirements must evolve and adapt as needed.

The Same Bad Connotation – No Contemporary Resolution

In 1962, the community changed its name from Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR) to Psychological Operations (PSYOP) because U.S. Forces were not conducting “warfare” on the unarmed populace during war, peacetime, or consolidation operations.⁶ While this shift may have seemed substantial at the time, it did not satisfy the actual root problem itself. As Americans seek to comprehend what is meant by this military term, the closest concept they can approximate is an unfair form of coercion, or to the even less grounded in reality, the term “brainwashing.” Therefore, the superficial change from “warfare” to “operations” has proven to be ineffective over the last forty-six years. Furthermore, witness some of the publicized difficulties that “psychological operations” have encountered within just the last ten years.

In March 1998, the New York Times published a story entitled “U.S. Training of Indonesian Troops Goes on Despite Ban.”⁷ Training under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program had ceased in 1992 due to Congressional concerns over possible human rights abuses occurring in Indonesia against the East Timorese.⁸ This article detailed the fact that, Defense Department documents show “The Pentagon has been training Indonesian military forces in specialized arts of warfare since 1992, despite a Congressional ban intended to curb human rights abuses by those soldiers.”⁹ It then stated in reference to Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCETs) that, “The Indonesian forces trained by the Pentagon



PSYOP Soldiers in Soccer Game with Iraqi Children

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include a special-forces commando unit called Kopassus, which human rights groups say have tortured and killed civilians. The unit has received training from United States special-operations soldiers in skills like *psychological warfare* and reconnaissance missions.” That year was the last year that US/Indonesia JCETs took place. Numerous websites picked up this information, and due to the inordinately broad term “psychological warfare,” indeed it gave a very dubious impression to the public at large. Toward the end of the article, it also stated that, “The JCET program provided training in *psychological operations* and marksmanship to the Rwandan Patriotic Army, which has been accused of the massacre of civilians in eastern Zaire.”¹⁰ Clearly a more innocuous term, or even speaking in terms of the tasks to be trained, “providing public information,” or “loudspeaker operations,” etc., would seem less damning in the eyes of a larger percentage of the public. Notice that the aforementioned Special Forces task of “reconnaissance missions” was listed out and not lumped under some sort of amorphous “Special Forces” term that left room for doubt. However, a different report placed the responsibility elsewhere in the Special Operations community when it incorrectly related that, “Army Special Forces ‘Green Berets’ instructed the Kopassus, an elite Indonesian unit, in skills that included urban warfare, advanced sniper techniques, air drop operations, close-quarters combat, and *psychological operations*.”¹¹

Yet another example is a General Accounting Office report to Congress from 1999 regarding the JCET program. It states that “in one JCET alone 39 special operations personnel from the Army, Navy, and Air Force trained with nearly 250 Thai military in activities such as small unit tactics, maritime beach reconnaissance/landing, and *psychological operations*.”¹² Clearly, the same problem is presented, however, the politico-military factors in Thailand were not as publicly volatile as those in Indonesia but the same potential for an immediate PSYOP “black eye” still existed.

In 2000, articles were published that, in a rather cursory manner, described internships under the Training with Industry program of PSYOP Soldiers at both CNN in Atlanta and NPR in Washington DC. One article accurately depicted the flavor of them all when it stated, “Media analysts who have expressed alarm about the case say that while any official armed-forces presence in the news-production process is cause for concern, the PSYOP personnel pose a particular threat, given the job they do.”¹³ Furthermore, the article stated that both CNN and NPR had taken action to cease participation in this arrangement.¹⁴ Ultimately, this particular article also asserted that, “PSYOP’s public standing probably suffers a bit due to the sinister-sounding terminology for the arsenal of weapons that target the mind. The parlance of propaganda operations includes euphemisms such as psychological warfare and perception management, but PSYOP is the term officially adopted by the U.S. military.”¹⁵ Even the expeditious, yet warranted, death of the Office of Strategic Influence, in its last writhing gasps was reported in the *New York Times* as “a mission of psychological operations, or psyops” with a quote from a senior Pentagon official that it “goes from the blackest of black programs to the whitest of white.”¹⁶

Of course, the community has also suffered a public blow to its reputation over the “burning bodies” incident of 2005 in which PSYOP soldiers were captured on film conducting loudspeaker operations as the bodies of two dead Taliban were burning nearby. The *New York Times* reported that the soldiers had, “burned the bodies of two dead Taliban fighters and then used the charred and smoking corpses in a propaganda campaign against the insurgents” and that it was conducted by an “American psychological operations team broadcasting taunts over their loudspeaker.”¹⁷ The obvious damage caused to the PSYOP profession due to poor judgment and elevated by the media, is further compounded by the weight that the terminology inevitably carries.

What is Today’s PSYOP- and What Must it NOT Be?

The increasingly ubiquitous term “Military Information Support Team” continues to have varying successes at U.S. Embassies, however, the danger of continuing this trend is the possibility of perpetuating or even exacerbating the current blur between Information Operations and Psychological Operations, which are not synonymous. While MIST is a seemingly innocuous term, it also has its roots in another time, a time prior to “information operations.” It was also the result of the impracticability of using the term PSYOP due to its usual negative connotations.¹⁸

The continued delays in formulating an effective alternative name underscore that it is truly a difficult process, namely because PSYOP are complex, multi-disciplinary, and largely intangible in nature. The field of PSYOP is very diverse and is clearly, like war itself, as much an art as it is a science. It involves aspects, to varying degrees, of psychology, sociology, anthropology, demography, international relations, political science, national security affairs, public relations, advertising, marketing, media and communications.¹⁹ While acknowledging difficulty, we must still pursue an alternative. The skill sets that make PSYOP officers and Noncommissioned Officers effective unnecessarily convolute the search for an all-encompassing and self-explanatory term. So what should PSYOP be called instead?

The new name must be as sweeping and descriptive of the current PSYOP missions as possible while remaining an innocuous term. It must convey the essence of the PSYOP missions without instigating automatic interagency or public backlash. Clearly, the community must understand that a thesaurus will not circumvent the adversity faced by using the term “psychological.” There can be no option considered having to do with “psychological,” “mental,” “persuasion,” “perception,” “influence,” etc., due to the inescapable, yet predictable, effects of the

very words. When viewed as the endeavors of the military or government these words appear to become sinister in nature. While it is important to acknowledge the public role that psychological operations play, adoption of such terminology as “public diplomacy,” “public communications,” etc., should be cautiously considered so long as we maintain necessary separation, avoid confusion, and more importantly, avoid the wider perception of a willful military manipulation of the accepted roles and standards of Public Affairs. While current Psychological Operations place a heavy emphasis on media operations neither this, nor advertising, nor marketing are all-encompassing enough terms due largely to the important face-to-face communications role conducted by Tactical PSYOP Teams (TPTs) in support of conventional and Special Operations Forces. In reality, the comprehensive answer is actually quite simple.

Foreign Communications

Probably the chief negative connotation that PSYOP carries is the belief that such operations can be conducted domestically within the U.S. Most people are completely unaware that PSYOP forces are prohibited from conducting operations, other than public information domestically, according to U.S. law and are prohibited from targeting U.S. citizens abroad.²⁰ Still, this perception has been perpetuated for 27 years after the passage

of the law and the signing of the executive order enforcing it on the DOD. This perception and is not likely to be rectified at this point. The alternative is to remove the possibility of such an association altogether. Therefore, the principal option is to stress the fact that we conduct operations in *foreign* locations directed toward *foreign* target audiences. This aspect begins to encapsulate the essence of what our community does “to influence the behavior of *foreign* audiences to support U.S. national objectives.”²¹ This first step to the name change debate is also in concert with much current thought over the competing roles of Information Operations and PSYOP. Colonel Curtis Boyd, a former 4th Psychological Operations Group Commander, proposes a reorientation of the current Information Operations model to one that focuses “PSYOP as the base for Army IO, forming the tactical ‘foreign media operations’ center of attention and main effort at corps and below.”²² Meanwhile, such a title as “foreign media operations” is not quite all encompassing enough. However, tactical face-to-face operations, while not necessarily utilizing media nevertheless constitute *Foreign Communications*. Thus, the true essence of what constitutes current PSYOP is articulated into something that is both much more palatable and descriptive. The term MIST that in some locations also has somewhat negative connotations – can be officially scrapped and instead we can deploy Foreign Communications Teams (FCTs). Tactical




US PSYOP Soldiers Working with Iraqi Police Media Relations Cell

Source: defenseimagery.mil

PSYOP Teams can ensure that maneuver commanders are still comfortable by only changing the term slightly to Tactical Communications Teams (TCTs).

Nevertheless, In the Interim..Be Mindful of “PSYOP”

In the meantime, and whenever the PSYOP name change occurs, when conducting missions abroad, such as JCETs the term PSYOP should be used sparingly as a task to be trained with foreign militaries. Combat engineers do not conduct engineering, but a host of tasks such as mining, mine clearing, demolitions, obstacle emplacement, breaching, etc. Similarly, Psychological Operations must be mindful of not allowing, just for simplicity's sake, tasks to be rolled up into the ever-prevalent and generic term “PSYOP.” If the JCET will include training in providing public information in a humanitarian disaster scenario, or possibly loudspeaker operations at the tactical level, then that is what should be listed in all pertinent documents. This will help to reduce the chances of perpetuating the same old negative connotations that PSYOP has conjured up for years. Until then, bureaucratic inertia can be overcome by Persuading, Changing, and Influencing²³ using *Foreign communications*. 

Footnotes:

¹ Colonel Paul E. Valley and Major Michael A. Aquino, “From PSYOP to MindWar: The Psychology of Victory,” Headquarters, 7th Psychological Operations Group, Presidio of San Francisco, California, 1980. <http://www.xeper.org/maquino/nm/MindWar.pdf>.

² Major George C.L. Brown, “Do We Need FA30? Creating an Information Warfare Branch,” *Military Review* (January-February 2005), 39-43. <https://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/brown2.pdf>.

³ Lieutenant-Colonel Frederic W. Rohm, Jr., “Merging Information Operations and Psychological Operations” *Military Review* (January-February 2008), 108-111. <http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/CAC/milreview/English/JanFeb08/RohmEngJanFeb08.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵ If battalion, brigade, and division commanders do not see the PSYOP community's marketing expertise, then PSYOP officers are not doing their jobs well. If the PSYOP community is failing to explain its discipline to the rest of the Army, is it any wonder that it is losing relevance?” *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶ Stanley Sandler, “Cease Resistance: It's Good For You!”: A History of U.S. Army Combat Psychological Operations (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command Historical Monograph Series No. 9, 1999), 261.

⁷ Tim Weiner, “U.S. Training of Indonesia Troops Goes on Despite Ban,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1998. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E1DC1339F934A25750C0A96E958260>.

⁸ William C. Story, Jr., CRS Report for Congress, “Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) and Human Rights: Background Issues for Congress,” 26 January 1999, 12.

⁹ Weiner, “U.S. Training of Indonesia Troops Goes on Despite Ban.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Story, Jr., “Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) and Human

Rights: Background Issues for Congress.”

¹² United States General Accounting Office, “Report to Congressional Requestors: Military Training: Management and Oversight of Joint Combined Exchange Training,” July 1999, 49. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1999/ns99173.pdf>.

¹³ John Elliston, “Target Audience: Fort Bragg's Propaganda Troops at Work on the Home Front,” *Independent Weekly*. <http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A14568>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Maureen Dowd, “Office of Strategic Mendacity,” *New York Times*, 20 February 2002. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE4DC173EF933A15751C0A9649C8B63>.

¹⁷ Eric Schmitt, “Army Examining an Account of Abuse of 2 Dead Taliban,” *New York Times*, 20 October 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/20/international/asia/20afghan.html>.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-53: Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations (5 September 2003), VI-5.

¹⁹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Soldier Training Publication 33-37II-OFS: Officer Foundation Standards II Psychological Operations (37A) Officer's Manual, 2 July 2007, iv.

²⁰ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-05.30: Psychological Operations, April 2005, 1-12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²² Colonel Curtis D. Boyd, “Army IO is PSYOP: Influencing More with Less,” *Military Review* (May-June 2007), 67-75, 74. <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC/milreview/English/MayJun07/Boyd.pdf>.

²³ “Persuade, Change, Influence” is the motto of the Psychological Operations Regiment.